

Farms for Veterans:  
Reclamation Settlement Policies and Results Following the World Wars

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## Abstract

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Between 1946 and 1964, the Bureau of Reclamation opened over 2,800 farms on federal reclamation projects in Wyoming, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California and Arizona. In 1944 Congress had granted veterans a 90-day preference right in applying for homesteads on reclamation projects. Thus, most who filed on these lands had served in the armed forces. In an effort to maximize the veterans' prospects for success as homesteaders, the Bureau drew upon over four decades of experience in creating irrigated homesteads in the West. Particularly the lessons learned by the Bureau in offering farms to veterans following World War I provided a springboard for the Bureau's post-World War II efforts.

Barely sixty percent of the 1,311 settlers who homesteaded on reclamation projects following World War I obtained title to their farms. Of those who did prove up, 75 percent (or about 45 percent of all 1,311 original claimants) retained their farms until 1944 – an impressive rate considering the economic volatility of the 1920s and 1930s. However, nearly half (46 percent) of those who had gained title to their homesteads no longer farmed the land themselves in 1944. Persistence rates were greater on the highly productive Klamath Project, where 65 percent of the homesteaders who had proved up continued to farm their land in 1944, than on the

North Platte Project in western Nebraska and eastern Wyoming, where only 19 percent still farmed their land.

Bureau employees identified a lack of capital, defects in the farms themselves, inexperience or lack of commitment on the part of the homesteaders and poor health as key reasons for the high attrition rates among post-World War I homesteaders. In an attempt to surmount these obstacles Congress in 1925 authorized the Secretary of the Interior to screen applicants for homesteads on the basis of industry, experience, character and capital. It also required the Bureau to conduct more careful surveys of the land itself before projects were approved. Both in the 1920s and the 1940s Congress rejected proposals from the Bureau for greater technical assistance and monetary assistance to homesteaders.

Working within the limitations imposed by Congress, the Bureau endeavored to improve economic opportunities and increase residential stability on lands that it opened to homesteading following World War II. In many cases, local examining boards undercut the effectiveness of the screening process for prospective settlers, opting to award homesteads to veterans who possessed very little capital. The screening process did insure that most homesteaders possessed some agricultural experience. Thanks to more careful preliminary studies, veterans generally enjoyed superior farming opportunities on the Bureau's projects in the 1940s and 1950s than their counterparts had received in the 1920s.

Notwithstanding the Bureau's more careful preliminary investigations, enough poor units were included in the post-1945 projects that Congress enacted Public Law 258 in 1953, providing for exchange of submarginal homesteads on reclamation projects. The law was largely inspired by the Bureau's most glaring postwar failure, extensions of the Riverton Project, where seepage

and alkaline soils made it impossible for over one-third of the postwar settlers to support themselves.

Despite the Bureau's intent to award farms to individuals who planned to spend their lives on the farm, many who obtained land actually regarded it as a speculative investment. Others who may have intended to reside permanently on the farm became discouraged by the rigors of homesteading or were enticed to leave by the prospect of higher wages or a higher standard of living off the farm. For a variety of reasons, then, many post-World War II homesteaders quickly moved away from their farms.

The percentage of homesteaders who retained their lands roughly two decades after they had been homesteaded was actually higher for the post-World War I cohort on the Klamath and North Platte projects than for the post-World War II group on the Minidoka, Klamath or Yuma projects. Absentee ownership, however, was less common among the post-1945 cohort than among the 1920s homesteaders. Whereas only 15 percent of all the veteran homesteaders at North Platte and 37 percent of the veterans who homesteaded in the 1920s on the Klamath project continued to occupy their lands 20 years later, 44 percent of the post-1945 homesteaders on the Klamath project and 30 percent of the post-1945 homesteaders on the Yuma project still resided on their farms 20 years after they had filed upon their lands. In this sense at least, the Bureau's efforts to reduce speculation and tenancy by screening settlers and improving the quality of opportunities on its projects had succeeded.

Shortly after World War II ended, 1,305 veterans applied for 86 irrigated homesteads on a federal reclamation project in northern California. One applicant, a Japanese American who had sustained 105 shrapnel wounds on the battlefield in Italy, aptly articulated the allure of a homestead for many veterans. “My entire life up to this moment has been spent on a ranch and it is my wish to keep on being a bona fide farmer,” he wrote. “Farming is all that I know. . . . With a ranch of my own I would have complete freedom of doing as I please . . . I have much to work for and the will to succeed is urging me ahead. Obtaining a homestead site will greatly reduce the strain on me. Let me assure you that my utmost desire is to make this project a success and to be one of the many who are planning to make this home community one to be proud of.”<sup>1</sup>

This young veteran hoped to win the opportunity to participate in a belated, little-known flurry of homesteading; between 1946 and 1964, an era when homesteading was generally no longer permitted, the Bureau of Reclamation opened over 2,800 farms on federal reclamation projects to veterans in Wyoming, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California and Arizona. In an effort to maximize the veterans’ prospects for success as homesteaders, the Bureau drew upon over four decades of experience in creating irrigated homesteads in the West. Particularly the lessons learned by the Bureau in offering farms to veterans following World War I provided a springboard for the Bureau’s post-World War II efforts. This paper examines the Bureau’s efforts to improve its homesteading program from the 1920s to the 1940s and to counteract or surmount obstacles that had plagued veterans homesteading on its projects following the First World War. It surveys key differences between the Bureau’s post-World War I homesteading program and its counterpart following the Second World War and traces some of the reasons for

those differences.

Following World War I the Department of the Interior received 196,000 inquiries regarding settlement opportunities on western reclamation projects. In February 1920, responding belatedly to the demand for farms, Congress through Public Resolution 29 granted a 60-day preference right to veterans in applying for homesteads on public lands, including federal reclamation projects. The preference period was later increased to 90 days. Although most veterans who had written to the Department of the Interior were no longer interested by the time that Congress belatedly acted, 10,875 would-be homesteaders applied for 1,311 farms that were opened to settlement on reclamation projects over the next 20 years. Particularly from 1920 to 1922 lands opened to entry were awarded almost exclusively to veterans. Most of these new farms were located on the Klamath project in California and Oregon and the Shoshone and North Platte projects in Wyoming. The farms were awarded by lottery.<sup>2</sup>

The post-World War I homesteading frontier had its share of impressive success stories. Take the case of Frank Vancluire, one of eighty veterans who took up homesteads on the North Platte Project's Fort Laramie Division early in 1920. A Bohemian immigrant who had moved to the United States in 1911, Vancluire farmed in New York and Nevada and worked in a sausage factory before joining the Army in 1917. One of his legs was severely injured during the war. With \$2,000 in capital and a monthly pension from the Veterans Bureau as a result of his wartime injury, Vancluire managed to develop his farm and construct a home without having to borrow money. His knowledge of irrigation as a result of his previous farm work in Nevada, combined with his industriousness and good fortune in receiving an exceptionally fertile

homestead, allowed him to prosper. Within four years his farm was valued at \$10,000 – far beyond the amount of money he had invested in the place.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the success stories, barely sixty percent of the 1,311 homesteaders on reclamation projects during the inter-war years obtained title to their farms. Of those who did prove up, 75 percent (or about 45 percent of all 1,311 original claimants) retained their farms until 1944 – an impressive rate considering the economic volatility of the 1920s and 1930s. However, nearly half (46 percent) of those who had gained title to their homesteads no longer farmed the land themselves in 1944. Persistence rates were greater on the highly productive Klamath Project, where 65 percent of the homesteaders who had proved up continued to farm their land in 1944, than on the North Platte Project, where only 19 percent still cultivated their land.<sup>4</sup>

The high percentage of homesteaders who departed without proving up, coupled with the failure of many veterans to farm the land after they gained title to it, concerned the Bureau of Reclamation. Andrew Weiss, superintendent of the North Platte project, was assigned by Commissioner Elwood Mead to investigate the reasons for the homesteaders' difficulties, focusing upon the Shoshone and North Platte projects. Weiss found that most veterans had arrived on the projects with insufficient funds. For instance, Sam Monaco, an industrious immigrant and World War I veteran, had come to the North Platte Project in 1920 with practically no capital. Monaco "made a very courageous trial for three years, being obliged to undergo every privation to get along." Unable to afford lumber for a pig pen or a hen house, he had sheltered the hens in his own shack and had dug a clay pit for the hogs. Despite his pluck, Monaco was eventually "forced to quit." No amount of ingenuity or hard work could compensate for his penury. Many homesteaders had rented out their farms after proving up,

Weiss reported, because they needed more money than their farms could furnish. For instance, E. G. Phelps, a homesteader in southeastern Wyoming, who was described by the project manager as “a very fine type farmer” and a “splendid type of man” who was “intelligent and anxious to learn” had tried to farm and work part-time elsewhere but he had found he “could not make it” financially. Finally he opted to rent his farm and work full time as a power house operator in order to support his family. Weiss estimated that over half (53 percent) of the veterans, like Monaco and Phelps, who homesteaded on the Fort Laramie division in 1920 were poorly prepared financially for homesteading. Only about one in four had arrived with sufficient money for “the necessary fixed improvements” and the “necessary farm equipment and livestock.”<sup>5</sup>

On the Frannie Division of the Shoshone project in northern Wyoming, Weiss discovered that in 1924 only five of the 57 veterans who had taken up lands there in 1920 remained. Even on better farms that had been opened to settlement the following year, only one in five homesteaders remained. Weiss identified their principle impediment as “the lack of capital.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to insufficient capital, defects in the land itself such as poor soil, drainage problems, or unrealistically small farms handicapped some veterans. Hundreds of veterans took up lands in the Goshen Irrigation District in southern Wyoming between 1921 and 1927, and roughly one-fifth “had very little chance of success” because of “poor or submarginal” farms, project superintendent Frank Roush estimated in hindsight. Farming conditions were worst on the Frannie Division of the Shoshone Project, where 95 farms were opened in 1920 and 1921. In 1924, the president of the local water users’ association reported that nearly two-thirds of the lands on the division were “practically valueless” because of seepage, alkaline soil and other



problems. Draining the lands adequately would cost an estimated \$30 per acre, but the land itself was valued at not more than \$25 per acre. A commission appointed by the Secretary of the Interior to study reclamation concluded in 1924 that “the lands on the Frannie Division are of such low agricultural value as to make it impossible for them to pay the cost of operation and maintenance of the irrigation works much less to return the construction costs.”<sup>7</sup>

Weiss reported that inexperience, coupled with underestimation of the rigors of farm life, had driven others from their farms. Roughly one in three veterans who homesteaded on the North Platte Project in 1920 had never lived or worked on a farm. “Too few of us knew much about irrigated farming when we started here,” observed homesteader George “Doc” Haas, one of only nineteen remaining homesteaders in 1947 out of 130 who had come to the Goshen Irrigation District in 1921. “We had every kind of ex-soldier, from piano tuners to paper hangers....We did not realize that there was no let-up in work, season after season.”<sup>8</sup>

Other veterans quickly sold or rented out their farms after proving up because they had always regarded their homesteads as speculative property. Weiss’s report showed that 35 percent of those who homesteaded on the Fort Laramie Division of the North Platte project in 1920 had no interest in farming, preferred some other occupation or disliked the country and therefore never intended to remain there. For instance, Paul J. Hall, a 30 year old veteran, was characterized by the project superintendent as “not hav[ing] much energy.” He lacked capital, farming experience and had “no desire to farm.” Moreover his wife disliked farm life. Willard Wertman, a 35 year old homesteader who had grown up on a farm in Milford, Nebraska, only farmed his unit for one season. He “always seemed to dislike the country and was dissatisfied with nearly every thing in connection with his farm, the community and the government.” F. W.

Bosse, had been raised on a farm and was a “good worker” but by disposition “not a farmer.” Similarly, T. J. Burchell, a railroad engineer and a druggist, “had no desire or qualifications as [a] farmer.” Some had homesteaded largely for speculative reasons. A. R. Baker, who had constructed a 10x12 shack on his homestead, had come from a wealthy family but invested little if any capital on the place and engaged only in “poor and nondescript farming.” A graduate of the Washington School of Finance, he worked as a financial expert and had only resided on the land long enough to acquire title. He had retained the land, though, “with hopes of higher values and oil boom.”<sup>9</sup>

Poor health dogged other homesteaders like L. C. Anstine, a veteran with a fair education, farming experience and a “good personality,” who suffered from a wartime injury. The project manager gauged his prospects for success in 1924 as “poor” because of his “physical handicap” although he noted that Anstine had “made a creditable effort.” Likewise, Bruce Morton, a 40-year-old veteran with farming experience, had made only “fair” progress as a farmer although he knew how to farm, was “industrious” and possessed a “good personality.” Having been “gassed” while fighting in the trenches, he labored under a “severe physical handicap.” The project manager believed Morton would “no doubt make a success if he were able-bodied and had sufficient capital.”<sup>10</sup>

In Weiss’s view, then, insufficient capital, defects in the land itself, inexperience, lack of commitment and poor health largely explained the lackluster performance of most veterans who homesteaded following World War I. Twenty years after Weiss filed his report, his successor as project manager, Fred Roush, identified five reasons postwar homesteaders had abandoned their units on the North Platte project. Roush believed the most important factor to be “poor and

submarginal units,” followed by “lack of financial aid” to the homesteaders during the farm development phase, the agricultural depression of the 1920s and 1930s, lack of managerial ability or ambition on the part of the veterans, and insufficient instruction of the settlers in irrigation and farming techniques by county agents or other qualified personnel.<sup>11</sup>

Shortly before Weiss completed his investigations of veteran homesteading and two decades before Roush offered his evaluation, the Fact Finders, a blue ribbon commission appointed by the Secretary of the Interior, had identified many of the same problems with homesteading in general on reclamation projects. In their report they had recommended that “new projects or extensions of existing projects should be authorized only after full information has been secured concerning the water supply, engineering features, soil, climate, transportation, markets, land prices, probable cost of development and other factors upon which the success of the project must depend.” They had also advocated screening applicants for homesteads on the basis of their “industry, experience, character, and possession of a part of the capital needed in improving their farms.” Additionally, they had recommended that the government provide agricultural and economic advisors and short-term, low-interest loans to settlers for livestock, equipment and farm development.<sup>12</sup>

A conservative Congress in 1925 rejected the Fact Finders’ calls for loans and agricultural advisors for settlers. In what became known as the Fact Finders’ Act, Congress did stipulate that “no new project or new division of a project shall be approved for construction . . . until information in detail shall be secured . . . concerning the water supply, the engineering features, the cost of construction, land prices, and the probable cost of development.” After gathering the requisite data, Congress instructed, the Secretary of the Interior must “ma[k]e a

finding in writing that it is feasible, that it is adaptable for actual settlement and farm homes, and that it will probably return the cost thereof to the United States” before construction could proceed. Congress also authorized the Secretary of the Interior to appoint examining boards to review the qualifications of prospective homesteaders and to establish minimum qualifications for homesteaders on reclamation projects in terms of “industry, experience, character, and capital.” After touring reclamation projects the following year, the Secretary, Hubert Work, concluded that “settlers should have enough capital to enable them to improve and equip their farms.”<sup>13</sup>

Following passage of the Fact Finders’ Act, the veterans’ preference law remained in force through 1940, but the Fact Finders’ Act now required all would-be homesteaders including veterans to meet minimum standards regarding industry, farming experience, character and capital. Examining boards consisting initially of the superintendent of the project, the county extension agent and a prominent farmer or businessman residing in the area were appointed by the Bureau of review each applicant’s qualifications. The Bureau required applicants to have at least two years of farming experience and to possess \$2,000 in capital or assets such as livestock or farming equipment that would be as useful cash on a farm. Examining boards were required to rate each applicant on the basis of character and industry and the boards could require applicants to submit medical evidence of good health.<sup>14</sup>

From 1925 to 1937, the four variables – industry, character, farm experience and capital – were weighted equally. After 1937, though, farm experience was weighted most heavily, followed by capital and then industry and character. While veterans continued to enjoy preference rights in all land openings, as veterans of the World War grew older and became

better established, they no longer applied for all available lands. Extensive homesteading almost exclusively by veterans would not again occur until after another World War.<sup>15</sup>

Soon after the veterans preference legislation expired in 1940, western Congressmen including James Scrugham of Nevada and John R. Murdock of Arizona discussed the possibility of extending these benefits for veterans over another two decades. In 1944, with national interest in the returning veterans crescendoing rapidly, Murdock believed the time had come to publicize the desirability of reclamation for veterans. As the House Committee on World War Veterans' Legislation held hearings in the Spring of 1944 on Senate bill 1767, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (G.I. Bill of Rights), Murdock capitalized upon Congress's interest in the future of America's soldiers and scheduled a meeting with the committee. He reminded them that "after every war our veterans have been taken care of in the public domain, lying in the West." Murdock proposed an amendment to the GI Bill which would entitle veterans to preference over all other applicants for homesteads on reclamation projects. The amendment also sought to enhance the veterans' chances for success by waiving over half of each homesteader's share of the Bureau's cost of constructing the irrigation system. After discussing Murdock's amendment to the GI Bill, the committee discarded it. Some felt that Murdock's amendment had merit but should be considered as a separate bill because it dealt only with the West; others believed the proposal was "too generous."<sup>16</sup>

Three months after Murdock's abortive attempt to amend the GI Bill, J. Hardin Peterson, a representative from Florida who chaired the House Committee on Public Lands, introduced H.R. 5025 in June of 1944, granting preference to veterans in applying for public lands "under the homestead or desert land laws" or under a 1938 law which permitted citizens to file on 5-acre

parcels of land. Partly because it made no mention of either the Bureau of Reclamation or the West but applied, in theory at least, to any public lands across the nation that might be opened to settlement, the measure attracted little attention or controversy. One day after H.R. 5025 had been referred to the Committee on Public Lands, Murdock as a member of that committee referred the bill without amendment to the House, recommending its passage and noting that a representative from the Department of the Interior had appeared before the committee to endorse it. Four days later the House approved the bill and submitted it to the Senate. Later that summer the Senate Committee on Public Lands and Surveys recommended passage of the bill and on August 13 the Senate acquiesced. On September 27, President Roosevelt signed the bill into law.<sup>17</sup>

With veterans preference for homesteading on public lands in place, the Bureau of Reclamation and its friends in Congress pushed for more. From their perspective based upon the experiences of post-World War I homesteaders, the veterans preference law was defective. One defect was that failed to provide for financial or technical assistance for the veterans. Warned one representative from the Bureau, “We feel that a man should be assisted sufficiently to increase to the optimum point his chances of success on the land. . . . I think we have had some failures on our projects that could have been avoided if we had given a little additional attention to getting the farm into production quickly and seeing that the farmer was properly coached in the methods of using his water.”

In tandem with John Murdock, officials in the Bureau worked to draft H.R. 520. Murdock introduced the bill in the Spring of 1945. Among other things, the bill authorized the Bureau to extend technical assistance to farmers on reclamation projects, permitted the Bureau to

contract with settlers or with water users' associations for clearing and leveling land to prepare it for irrigation, and authorized "necessary" appropriations for these activities. The bill proposed other mechanisms for assisting the veterans financially: it permitted governmental agencies "authorized to make provision for the reestablishment of veterans in civil life" to become involved "to the fullest extent" that was legally and administratively feasible in extending "financial assistance" to the veterans "for the acquisition or erection of housing, farm buildings and adjuncts, improvements, equipment, chattels, and operating capital, and for transportation to the project."<sup>18</sup>

Referred to the House Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation, with Murdock as the chair, the bill was made the committee's first item of business. Through the committee's hearings, stretching from April 12 to May 22, Congress probed the relationship of veterans to federal reclamation.

Ultimately representatives of the Department of Agriculture expressed the most influential opposition to the bill. Praising the idea of veterans preference, Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard sharply criticized the second section of the bill. That section authorized the Secretary of the Interior to purchase and sell lands within or near projects, to predevelop project lands including clearing and leveling them, and to provide technical and agricultural guidance and advice to settlers. Such provisions, warned Wickard, would "duplicate machinery already set up for the whole of agriculture in the Department of Agriculture" and would therefore be a "wasteful" use of governmental resources. As Representative J. Will Robinson put it, section 2 appeared to be "setting up some super-agency to take care of the veterans."<sup>19</sup>

As a result of these objections, the committee, in concert with representatives from the Bureau, altered the bill somewhat. The amended bill differed from the original in the sense that it extended veterans preference to those who had served during the First as well as the Second World War and specified the Veterans Administration as the government agency authorized to loan funds to the homesteaders. In response to concerns from the Department of Agriculture, the amended bill authorized the Secretary of the Interior to “obtain through or in cooperation with the State colleges and appropriate agencies of the Government guidance and advice for settlers on lands within the projects in matters of irrigation farming; and to disseminate information by appropriate means and methods,” whereas the original bill had authorized the Secretary “to extend guidance and advice to settlers...and to disseminate information,” without any reference to cooperation with other government agencies.<sup>20</sup>

Three months after receiving the committee’s report, the House turned its attention to H.R. 520. President Truman had urged Congress to approve the bill in order to give “outstanding opportunities for returning veterans.” As had been the case in the committee hearings, no one voiced opposition to the concept of veterans preference. For instance, John W. Flannagan of Virginia, chair of the House Committee on Agriculture, claimed, “We are all in accord that the veterans should be given preference in the purchase of this reclaimed land.”<sup>21</sup>

Although rewarding the veterans seemed to be desirable to all, representatives voiced several arguments against other features of the bill. The foremost argument was that the bill, even as amended, authorized the Secretary of the Interior to become involved in agricultural training and technical assistance although the Department of Agriculture already had similar programs in place. The House Committee on Agriculture, which had met to review the bill that



morning, had drafted an amendment eliminating all key provisions of the bill aside from the granting of preferential rights to veterans and the provision of information and financial assistance by the Veterans Administration. Irrigation and Reclamation Committee member Robert Rockwell noted that the committee had not even consulted with the new secretary of Agriculture, Clinton Anderson, who had opposed the bill in writing on the same grounds as his predecessor. Everett M. Dirksen of Illinois charged the bill unduly broadened the activities of the Bureau of Reclamation and the Department of the Interior, duplicating services which were already being furnished by the Department of Agriculture. Similarly, Clarence Cannon of Missouri opposed the duplication of services of two bureaus.<sup>22</sup>

Others objected to the bill's focus upon western lands, arguing that few genuine opportunities awaited the veterans on reclamation projects in the rural West. The bill would play "a dirty trick on the veterans," claimed Jessie Sumner of Illinois, forcing them into unwinnable pioneering situations rather than loaning them funds so that they could buy improved farms. Chester Gross of Pennsylvania questioned the wisdom of veterans' homesteading in the West. "It induces them now to go out into the West on new lands, where rattlesnakes might bite their children and coyotes and wolves endanger the lives of their wives, and where their greatest asset is sunshine, which never pays mortgages or educates their children and where foxes will kill their chickens and crows pick the eyes out of any livestock that is born outside," he claimed, concluding, "It is just not right." Rising to the challenge William Lemke of North Dakota retorted that "in many places east of the Mississippi River nothing worthwhile grows even if they have water."<sup>23</sup>

Committee members who favored the bill attempted to refute the criticism of their

colleagues. The new Secretary of Agriculture clearly had not taken occasion to compare the former bill with the newly amended one, some insisted; he had merely repeated the objections of the former secretary, which had been addressed and resolved by the committee in redrafting the bill. Strenuously opposing the proposed amendment which would excise most of the bill, committee members argued that it would reduce veterans preference to a meaningless gesture. Antonio Fernandez of New Mexico maintained that a veterans preference law which contained no provisions for financial or educational assistance to homesteaders would be “nothing but an empty shell,” similar to the preference right that veterans received after the First World War. John Murdock called the amended bill “a mockery” and Will Robinson of Utah warned that those who wanted to strike most of the bill and claimed to be “so strong for the veterans” were actually “leav[ing] a hollow shell for the veterans,...helping them with one hand but...taking everything away [with the other] that was given them by a committee that studied this bill for 3 or 4 weeks.” Murdock agreed that “the powers of the Bureau of Reclamation are somewhat extended by the terms of this bill,” but he maintained that this was necessary because the projects to be developed were “more difficult” ones with more “difficult engineering problems” than the first projects that had been developed.<sup>24</sup>

At length, opponents of the bill carried the day, although the vote was close. The House voted 76 to 68 to approve the first section of the bill, with its provision for veterans preference, but to jettison most of the other provisions, including any expansion of the Interior Department’s jurisdiction. The amended bill was sent to the Senate where it was referred to the Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation, but the amended bill had no strong supporters in the House; after all the lip service that had been paid to the veterans, no one, it seemed, was very interested in this

watered down bill's fate in the Senate. Certainly Murdock and his associates on the Irrigation Committee, along with the Bureau of Reclamation, saw no charm in such a limited bill. Perhaps their disinterest stemmed from their belief that the amended bill offered nothing substantial to veterans, although it still did confer preference rights and instructed the Veterans Administration to assist the homesteaders financially. Certainly the bill did nothing for the Bureau or for development of western lands. Preoccupied with other matters, the Senate committee never held hearings on the bill and never referred it back to the full Senate, and so the bill died.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the fate of H.R. 520, the principle of veterans preference still applied to public lands being opened for homesteading, including reclamation projects, due to H.R. 5025, the measure that had been approved without debate in the preceding year. Although Congress had refused to furnish the types of economic and educational assistance advocated by Murdock and the Bureau in the 1940s and the Fact Finding Commission in the 1920s, strides had been made in terms of screening applicants for homesteads and requiring more rigorous reviews of the agricultural potential of proposed projects. Would these factors improve the quality of economic opportunities for World War II veterans on reclamation projects? Would a higher percentage of homesteaders gain title to their lands and personally cultivate them than had been the case following World War I?

The demand for farms following the Second World War was not as great as pundits during the war had forecast it would be. Nevertheless, the demand for farms, as reflected in applications, remained far greater than the Bureau could satisfy. Despite the fact that the general trend in American society involved leaving the farm behind, farm life, even on raw lands with the risks that it entailed, remained attractive to many veterans. On all projects excluding the

mammoth Columbia Basin project where most of the lands were offered for sale rather than as homesteads, the Bureau received a total of 66,296 applications (many veterans applied for a farm on several projects) for 1,422 farms between 1946 when the first postwar drawing was held and 1957 when 145 farms were awarded on the Northside Pumping Division of the Minidoka project in Idaho. The ratio of farms to applicants in these drawings was nearly 47 to 1. The ratio of applicants to farms ranged from 8.5 applicants per farm in a drawing on the Riverton project in Wyoming in 1947 to a high of nearly 309 applicants per farm on a block of land with 11 farms in the Columbia Basin in 1952. Desire for lands actually increased with the passage of time. Whereas the ratio of applicants to farms never topped 100 in the immediate postwar era, beginning in 1951 ratios of over 150 applicants to each farm were commonplace.<sup>26</sup>

With such high numbers of applicants, the Bureau seemingly possessed an ideal opportunity to weed out candidates who possessed insufficient capital or insufficient farming experience. Shortly after the war ended, however, local examining boards were given greater leeway in determining the amount of capital and degree of farming experience that would be required for those applying for homesteads on individual projects. Inasmuch as letters of recommendation submitted by the applicants regarding their character and industry were “invariably . . . favorable in tone” and “overworked such words and phrases as honest, reliable, morally above reproach, etc.” capital and farm experience were the most objective and reliable criteria for determining the fitness of applicants for homesteading. While the policy of allowing local boards to adjust minimum requirements made the process more decentralized and democratic it also imperiled the original purpose of the somewhat elitist and exclusionary standards: selecting homesteaders with the sufficient capital and experience to virtually insure

their success.<sup>27</sup>

On the Klamath project, site of the first land opening following World War II, representatives of local civic, veterans' and agricultural organizations met with Bureau officials to determine the prerequisites for would-be homesteaders. Under a system implemented by the Bureau in 1936, applicants for homesteads were rated on scale of 100 points. Those with more than \$2,000 in assets could receive as many as 10 points more than those who possessed only the minimum amount. Representing the interests of young, predominantly poor, land-hungry veterans the members of a nearby American Legion post protested, "The whole deal stinks, especially the ten thousand dollar clause." F. D. Rockbice, a World War I veteran who had homesteaded on the Klamath project in the 1920s, expressed the prevailing sentiment. Rockbice argued that the capital requirements were "not . . . fair." "Because a man has 10 or 50 thousand does not make him a better farmer, a better man, or a better citizen than the little fellow who wants a home for himself and family and a chance to better himself," he maintained. Rockbice conceded that someone with lots of money would have "very little chance" of "fail[ing] to make good." But he believed the government should be more concerned with preserving the homestead law's intent, which was "to give the man that did not have a home a chance to make one." Ultimately those responsible for fixing standards for the 1946 applicants on the Klamath project voted to scrap the flexible points system for capital requirements, although they decided by a margin of only one vote that it was "not only fair but necessary in order to assure the success to the entrymen" to require at least \$2,000. By refusing to boost capital requirements beyond the level that had prevailed for two decades, though, the examining board increased the likelihood that homesteaders would fail; \$2,000 in 1946 would buy far less than it could have

bought ten years earlier. In 1948 on the Klamath project, the examining board went even further, voting by a margin of 26 to 3 that applicants be permitted to substitute a credit rating for capital.<sup>28</sup>

The examining board on the Klamath Project nearly decided to scrap the farm experience requirement as well as the requirement for capital. At a meeting prior to a 1948 land opening on the project, a group of veterans who had constituted a local Veterans' Independent Action Committee opposed any attempt to exclude applicants on the basis of farm experience. Those with appropriate "intention, willingness and ability to learn" should not be penalized for their lack of actual farming experience, their spokesman maintained. Others attending the meeting agreed in principle but wondered how one could gauge intent accurately. One member of the examining board, Nelson Reed, believed that someone who had previously farmed and applied for a homestead would be more likely to "stick on the homestead," knowing in advance what they were getting into. "If he farmed before" and chose to apply for a homestead it was a good sign that he "ha[d] intentions of remaining on the farm." On the other hand, "if he ha[d] no previous farming experience," he would not be able to anticipate the rigors of farm life. How could the board "tell if he [was] sincere" enough to persist in the face of adversity? In "tough years," those without experience might not even "be able to stick it out" without the requisite agricultural skills, a representative from a local chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars suggested. At length, those attending the meeting chose by a slim majority to retain the requirement of at least two years of farming experience.<sup>29</sup>

Examining boards on other projects followed similar procedures in establishing minimum qualifications for applicants. The result was that the capital requirements varied considerably.

On the Yuma Project, the examining board insisted upon \$1,000 in cash and \$1,000 in operating capital or assets. Applicants for farms on the Shoshone Project were only required to possess \$1,000 in cash or assets and two years of farming experience but those who possessed more capital (up to \$2,500) or more experience (up to five years) were given priority over others. The examining board for the Boise Project required applicants to possess \$3,500 in cash or assets that could readily be converted into cash, and stipulated that an applicant's automobiles and household goods could count for no more than \$1,000 of that amount. Applicants for lands in the Columbia Basin near Pasco were required to have a net worth of at least \$3,700.<sup>30</sup>

Although Congress had rejected calls for the Bureau of Reclamation to provide technical assistance to homesteaders, the Bureau did furnish some assistance and coordinated other assistance with other local, state and federal agencies through its project land use or settlement specialists. The Bureau cooperated with Washington State College in producing a *Farmer's Handbook* for settlers in the Columbia Basin. The booklet contained information on a variety of topics including farm life, housing, climate, erosion, irrigation, weed control and pest control. On the Shoshone Project, the Bureau arranged for settlers to use its machines, hand tools and concrete forms free of charge in a laboratory to pour their concrete drops for irrigation ditches, with supervision from Bureau employees. Under development contracts, the Bureau also furnished prefabricated irrigation structures. Settlers could also borrow equipment such as portable sprayers from the Bureau for tasks such as eradicating weeds. In 1948, Bureau personnel on the project assisted 48 homesteaders on their farms with irrigating, surveyed and staked farm ditches on 60 farms, contracted with 68 farmers for farm development work such as land leveling and land clearing, located fence lines on 13 farms and worked up farm development

plans for all 111 farms. Most settlers felt the technical assistance they received was sufficient. In a systematic sampling of 208 settlers on the Columbia Basin late in 1954, only 4 percent identified lack of advice or incorrect advice from public agencies as a major problem they had encountered and only 6 percent perceived inexperience or uncertainty regarding the proper course to pursue as a major handicap.<sup>31</sup>

Whereas the Bureau succeeded in furnishing technical assistance and disseminating information it was unable to proffer settlers on its projects the capital they desired, although many settlers did obtain loans from the Farmers Home Administration. The level of capital needed by farmers had never been higher. On the Northside Division of the Minidoka Project the cost of clearing land, leveling it, constructing farm ditches, drops and other irrigation works and applying fertilizer averaged \$57 per acre. Additionally the government estimated the cost of a modern home; farm buildings; machinery such as tractors, disks, grain drills, checkers, haymowers and rakes; and domestic water supply at \$17,500.<sup>32</sup>

With the exception of settlers on the unusually productive Klamath project, most veterans found it difficult to secure financing from local banks. In a survey of farmers in the Columbia Basin, over one fifth cited inadequate credit or capital as a key problem. The experiences of individual veterans illustrate their problems with insufficient capital. In their first year of farming in the Coachella Valley Pearl and Wayne Mayfield "needed fertilizer bad[ly]" but could not obtain a loan for it because they "didn't own the land" and therefore could not use their farm as collateral. A banker in Moses Lake, Washington, told one veteran that he expected "the first three farmers on these farm units were gonna go broke before one made it . . . so they weren't gonna have anything to do with [the] farmers at all." The fact that many homesteaders were



young and had no credit rating also made bankers suspicious of them. When Jake Colvin applied for a loan from a bank in Yuma, the banker inquired about his credit rating. "I said, 'Best in the world; I've paid cash for everything I ever bought in my life.' 'Well that's not credit. You've got no credit,' they said. 'We just can't loan money to somebody that doesn't have a credit rating.'"

To establish a credit rating Elliott Waits borrowed a small amount from one bank in Yuma, deposited it in another, drew some interest, paid the remaining interest on the loan and then repaid the bank in six months.<sup>33</sup>

Alongside settler selection and provision of credit and technical assistance, critics of the Bureau's post-World War I homesteading program had pointed to the need for more rigorous evaluation of actual farming opportunities on the projects including water supply, soil quality, climate, and accessibility to markets. As evidence of the Bureau's more careful preparatory work, settlers in the 1940s and 1950s received contour maps for their farm units showing optimal locations for irrigation structures and detailed classifications of their soils. Reclamation Commissioner Michael W. Straus boasted in 1949 that "almost 100 percent of the new settlers make good." Straus was exaggerating, but veterans did generally enjoy superior farming opportunities on the Bureau's projects in the 1940s and 1950s than their counterparts had received in the 1920s.<sup>34</sup>

Notwithstanding the Bureau's more careful preliminary investigations, enough poor units were included in the post-1945 projects that Congress enacted Public Law 258 in 1953, providing for exchange of submarginal homesteads on reclamation projects. The law was largely inspired by the Bureau's most glaring postwar failure, extensions of the Riverton Project where seepage and alkaline soils made it impossible for over one-third of the postwar homesteaders to support

themselves. Assistant Commissioner H. F. McPhail admitted in 1953, “The facts clearly show that large amounts of money have been expended for construction of irrigation facilities on the newer portions of the project without reasonable certainty that the soils were irrigable.” Reporter Morton Margolin quoted an anonymous Bureau employee as saying that officials in the Bureau had disregarded warning signs and rushed ahead because “Congress and the Administration were alike in their desire to provide new farm lands as soon as possible” following the Second World War. “Political pressures dictated an expediting of construction, which prevented as thorough an investigation as the Bureau usually makes.”<sup>35</sup>

Despite the desire of the Bureau and of local examining boards to award farms to those who intended to spend their lives on the farm, many homesteaders actually regarded their homestead as a speculative investment. Others who may have originally planned to make the farm their home became discouraged by the hardships of homesteading or were enticed by the prospect of higher wages or a higher standard of living off the farm. Turnover rates were lowest on the Klamath Project where the soil was richest. Ninety percent of the homesteaders there remained on their farms at the end of the first four years and 43.5 percent remained in 1968, 20-22 years after the homesteaders had arrived. On other projects fewer settlers stayed. On the Minidoka Project by the end of 1960, seven years after the first settlers had arrived on the project, 72 percent of a cluster sample of 83 veterans who had acquired a farm prior to 1959 retained their land. Within 20-22 years of the veterans' arrival, 31 percent still owned the land. At Yuma Mesa, where the summertime heat was nearly unbearable, 75 percent of the first group of 54 homesteaders remained on their farms after two years. Ten years after the first settlers had arrived, 44 percent of them were still there, and after twenty years one-third of them remained.<sup>36</sup>

Looking back upon outcomes of homesteading by veterans following the First and Second World Wars, how do they compare? Of all the areas opened to homesteading following 1945, only the Riverton Project witnessed an extensive exodus of homesteaders during the first decade of settlement comparable to veterans' abandonment of the Shoshone Project in the 1920s. However, the percentage of homesteaders who retained their lands roughly two decades after they had been homesteaded was actually higher for the post-World War I cohort on the Klamath and North Platte projects than for the post-World War II group on the Minidoka, Klamath or Yuma projects. Absentee ownership, however, was less common among the post-1945 cohort than among the 1920s homesteaders. Whereas only 15 percent of all the veteran homesteaders at North Platte and 37 percent of the veterans who homesteaded in the 1920s on the Klamath project continued to occupy their lands 20 years later, 44 percent of the post-1945 homesteaders on the Klamath project and 30 percent of the post-1945 homesteaders on the Yuma project still resided on their farms 20 years after they had filed upon their lands. In this sense at least, the Bureau's efforts to reduce speculation and tenancy by screening settlers and improving the quality of opportunities on its projects had apparently succeeded.

## Notes

1. Ten Broek Williamson, "History of the 1946 Land Opening on the Tule Lake Division of the Klamath Project," typescript, 1947, pp. 62-63, File 732, Historical Files, Bureau of Reclamation, Klamath Falls, OR.
2. Congress, House, Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation, *Settlement of Returning Veterans on Farms in Reclamation Projects*, 79<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 12 April 1945, 90-92, 97; Congress, Senate, *Federal Reclamation by Irrigation*, 68<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., S. Doc. 92, (1924), 97.
3. Andrew Weiss, "Special Report on 80 Soldier Entries of March 5, 1920, Fort Laramie Division, North Platte Project," unpublished typescript, 1924, 151-52, Box 846, General Administrative and Project Records, 1919-1945, Record Group [RG] 115, National Archives - Rocky Mountain Region, [NA], Denver.
4. Congress, *Settlement of Returning Veterans*, 92. Persistence rates on reclamation homesteads comparable to the rates that Richard Bremer found in Nebraska from 1935 to 1945. Only 54 percent of the Nebraska farmers in Bremer's sample for 1935 remained on the same farms five years later, and by 1945 the figure had dropped to 35.9 percent. See Richard G. Bremer, Agricultural Change in an Urban Age: The Loup Country of Nebraska, 1910-1970, University of Nebraska Studies New Series no. 51 (Lincoln, 1976), 129.
5. Weiss, "Special Report," 3, 34, 68-89, 74-75.
6. Andrew Weiss to Elwood Mead, 28 July 1924, Folder: 500 North Platte Colonization and Settlement – General, thru 1929," Box 846, RG 115, NA.
7. Congress, *Settlement of Returning Veterans*, 93; Congress, *Federal Reclamation by Irrigation*, 98, 202; Robert White, *Frannie-Deaver Proposition: A Chronicle of Optimism – and Alkali* (Cheyenne: Frontier Printing Co., 1990), 159, 184-85.
8. Weiss, "Special Report," 33-34, 126-27; Vaughn Mechau, "Veteran, Wyoming," *Reclamation Era* 33 (May 1947):119.
9. Weiss, "Special Report," 62-63, 70-73, 126-27.
10. Weiss, "Special Report," 99-100, 161-62.
11. Congress, *Settlement of Returning Veterans*, 93.
12. Congress, *Federal Reclamation by Irrigation*, 47, 97-102, 123.

13. Richard K. Pelz, ed., *Federal Reclamation Laws and Related Laws Annotated*, 4 vols. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1972), 1:316-27.
14. John B. Holt, *An Analysis of Methods and Criteria Used In Selecting Families for Colonization Projects*, Social Science Research report no.1 (Washington, DC: Farm Security Administration and Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1937), 24, 33-36; John C. Page to Carl Hayden, 23 December 1937, Folder 503: General Correspondence re: Selection of Settlers, 1936-37, Box 835, General Correspondence File, 1930-45, RG 115, NA; Department of the Interior, "Information for Homeseekers," handbill dated 30 June 1927, Folder: 510.2 North Platte Publicity Methods thru 1929, Box 847, General Administrative and Project Records, 1919-1945, RG 115, NA.
15. Holt, *Analysis of Methods*, 34-35.
16. Congress, House, Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation, *Preference to Ex-Servicemen for Entry to Public Lands on Reclamation Projects*, 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 25 May 1944, 5; 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess. CR (15 May 1944):4508-9.
17. *Statutes at Large* 58, part 1, 747 (1945); Congress, House, Report no. 1646, 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess. (1944); Congress, Senate, Report no. 1084, 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess. (1944); 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess. CR 5:5933, 6011, 6200, 6247; 6:7608, 7721, 7907, 8042, 8162.
18. Congress, *Preference to Ex-Servicemen*, 21; Congress, *Settlement of Returning Veterans*, 1-4, 336.
19. Ibid., 232, 320.
20. Congress, House, Report no. 688, 79<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup> sess. (1945):1-6.
21. 79<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess. *Congressional Record (CR)* (19 September 1945):8774.
22. Ibid., 8774-75, 8779-80, 8788.
23. Ibid., 8778, 8785.
24. Ibid., 8776, 8780, 8783.
25. Ibid., 8789; 79<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., CR, 8802.
26. Caldwell [ID] *News-Tribune*, 23 March 1950; Bureau of Reclamation, "Report to the Commissioner on Land Opening of Part I, Heart Mountain Division, Shoshone Project," 27 October 1947, mimeograph, p. 14, copy in files of Shoshone Irrigation District, Powell, WY; Bureau of Reclamation, "Report to the Commissioner on Land Opening of Part II, Heart Mountain Division, Shoshone Project," 15 December 1947, mimeograph, p. 7, copy in Ibid.; Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History for Shoshone Project, 1949," typescript, p. 68;

Bureau of Reclamation, "Narrative Report: Yuma Project Land Opening under Public Notice no. 59" (mimeograph, 1950), 1, copy in Bureau of Reclamation Regional Library and Office, Boulder City, NV; *Yuma Daily Sun*, 7 January 1954; Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History for Gila Project, 1956," typescript, p. 17; *Yuma Daily Sun*, 29 June 1948; "Yuma Mesa Farms Go to 27 Lucky Vets," *Reclamation Era*, 38 (August 1952):199; Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History for Vale Project, 1947," typescript, viii; Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History for Riverton Project, 1947," typescript, p. 64; Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History for Riverton Project, 1949," typescript, 103; Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History for Riverton Project, 1950," typescript, p. 98; *Minidoka County News*, 19 May 1955, 26 April 1956, 5 July 1957; *Twin Falls Times-News*, 5 August 1953; *Indio [CA] News*, 28 September 1954; *Seattle Times*, 30 March 1949; Ten Broeck Williamson, "History of the 1946 Land Opening on the Tule Lake Division of the Klamath Project," typescript, 1947, p. v-vi, Historical File 732, Bureau of Reclamation, Klamath Falls; Bureau of Reclamation, "Narrative History Report of the Klamath Project Land Opening under Public Notice no. 47," typescript, 1948, p. 1, in *Ibid*; Stan Turner, *The Years of Harvest: A History of the Tule Lake Basin* (Eugene, OR: 49<sup>th</sup> Avenue Press, 1987), 307-8; Paul Curtis Pitzer, "Visions, Plans and Realities: A History of the Columbia Basin Project" (doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon, 1990), 157.

27. "Minutes of public meeting held March 30, 1948 at Klamath Falls, Oregon," pp. 1-2, 6; File 730: Klamath Economics Reports: Applicants for Homestead Drawing, 1948-1949, Historical Files, Bureau of Reclamation, Klamath Falls, OR.

28. *Ibid.*, 6; F. D. Rockbice to Harold L. Ickes, 15 January 1945, File 730: Inquiries Regarding Opportunities, Historical Files, Bureau of Reclamation, Klamath Falls, OR; Williamson, "History of the 1946 Land Opening," 10, 43-44, 76.

29. "Minutes of public meeting held March 30, 1948 at Klamath Falls, Oregon," 6-11.

30. Yuma Project Public Notice No. 59, 22 August 1947, in "Narrative Report: Yuma Project Land Opening under Public Notice No. 59," typescript, 1950, copy in Regional Office, Bureau of Reclamation, Boulder City, NV; "Project History: Boise Project, 1949," typescript, 1949, 112, Bureau of Reclamation, Boise; Exhibit IV-1 in "Report to the Commissioner on Land Openings, Parts I and II, Heart Mountain Division, Shoshone Project," typescript, 1949, Shoshone Irrigation District Office, Powell, WY; Columbia Basin Project Public Notice No. 1.1, 20 July 1948, Box 13, Frank A. Banks Papers, Special Collections and Archives, Washington State University, Pullman.

31. Important [Notice] to Applicants for Homesteads on Gooding Division, Hunt Unit, Minidoka Project," [ca. March 1947], Minidoka Project - Milner Gooding File, Bureau of Reclamation, Burley, ID; Washington State College and Bureau of Reclamation, *Farmers' Handbook for the Columbia Basin Project* (n.p., n.d. [ca 1954]), Archives and Special Collections, Washington State University, Pullman; "Report to the Commissioner on Land Openings, Parts I and II, Heart Mountain Division, Shoshone Project," 36, 69; Murray Strauss, *The Columbia Basin Settler: A*

*Study of Social and Economic Resources in New Land Settlement*, Washington Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 566 (Pullman: State College of Washington, 1956), 36.

32. Strauss, *Columbia Basin Settler*, 36..

33. *Minidoka County News*, 26 May 1955; 7 May 7 1957; Pearl Mayfield, Interview by Brian Cannon, 20 May 1997; David Hunt, Interview by Brian Cannon, 18 August 1996; Carlos "Jake" Colvin, Interview by Brian Cannon, 24 May 1997; Elliott Waits, Interview by Brian Cannon, 23 May 1997, transcripts in author's possession.

34. *Riverton Review*, 4 December 1947, 29 September 1949.

35. H. F. McPhail to Regional Director, 17 December 1953, Folder Riverton 740, Box 402, Accession 115-66-AU0447, Federal Records Center, Denver; "Annual Project History: Riverton Project, 1953," vol. 36, mimeograph, pp. 10, 75-77; *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, 8 August 1953.

36. Persistence rates on the Northside Pumping Division of the Minidoka project were calculated using county real estate records for a cluster sample. This cluster sample includes all settlers whose patents were dated 1956 or 1957 and officially recorded in the Minidoka County Recorder's Office by July 15, 1959. Additionally, it includes patents dated 1958 for settlers with surnames beginning with the letters A-L that were recorded through page 71 of Minidoka County Patent Book 6. Persistence rates for the Yuma project were calculated using Yuma city and county directories located in the Yuma public library. Persistence rates on the Klamath Project through 1952 are based upon a survey conducted by the Bureau of Reclamation in 1952 and reported in "Report on Progress of Settlers on Farm Units in Reclamation Projects Opened to Settlement, 1945-1952," Folder 730: "Lands Settlement and Land Entries, August 27, 1948-February 9, 1958," Historical Records, Bureau of Reclamation, Klamath Falls, OR. Information regarding settler persistence through 1968 was calculated from a list of the settlers attached to Reunion Committee to Mr. Lawrence, 11 July 1968, Folder 730: "Klamath Settlement (Homestead Reunion)," Bureau of Reclamation, Klamath Falls, OR.